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## 'Superweed' explosion threatens Monsanto heartlands

"Superweeds" are plaguing high-tech Monsanto crops in southern US states, driving farmers to use more herbicides, return to conventional crops or even abandon their farms.

The gospel of high-tech genetically modified (GM) crops is not sounding quite so sweet in the land of the converted. A new pest, the evil pigweed, is hitting headlines and chomping its way across Sun Belt states, threatening to transform cotton and soybean plots into weed battlefields.

In late 2004, "superweeds" that resisted Monsanto's iconic "Roundup" herbicide, popped up in GM crops in the county of Macon, Georgia. Monsanto, the US multinational biotech corporation, is the world's leading producer of Roundup, as well as genetically engineered seeds. Company figures show that nine out of 10 US farmers produce Roundup Ready seeds for their soybean crops.

Superweeds have since alarmingly appeared in other parts of Georgia, as well as South Carolina, North Carolina, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri, according to media reports. Roundup contains the active ingredient glyphosate, which is the most used herbicide in the USA.

How has this happened? Farmers over-relied on Monsanto's revolutionary and controversial combination of a single "round up" herbicide and a high-tech seed with a built-in resistance to glyphosate, scientists say.

Today, 100,000 acres in Georgia are severely infested with pigweed and 29 counties have now confirmed resistance to glyphosate, according to weed specialist Stanley Culpepper from the University of Georgia.



GM protesters demonstrate near the French town of Toulouse in March 2008.

"Farmers are taking this threat very seriously. It took us two years to make them understand how serious it was. But once they understood, they started taking a very aggressive approach to the weed," Culpepper told FRANCE 24.

"Just to illustrate how aggressive we are, last year we hand-weeded 45% of our severely infested fields," said Culpepper, adding that the fight involved "spending a lot of money."

In 2007, 10,000 acres of land were abandoned in Macon country, the epicentre of the superweed explosion, North Carolina State University's Alan York told local media.

### The perfect weed

Had Monsanto wanted to design a deadlier weed, they probably could not have done better. Resistant pigweed is the most feared superweed, alongside horseweed, ragweed and waterhemp.